Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi
Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters
Aralık/December 2021 – *38*(2), 548-561
doi:10.32600/huefd.888264

Hakemli Makaleler – Refereed Articles
Geliş Tarihi / Received: 28.02.2021 Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 09.08.2021

May as a Figure of Resistance in the *Merchant's Tale*[1]

Tüccar'ın Hikayesi'nde Direniş Figürü olarak May

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Abstract

As a popular genre of medieval English literature, fabliau is a short, bawdy, and humorous story of the adultery of a young wife who is married to an old husband. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer includes the *Merchant's Tale* as a fabliau in which May, the young wife of January, is engaged in an extramarital affair. May's representation as adulterous and lecherous seems to reinforce the antifeminist claims of the genre; however, at the same time her active participation into the action of the fabliau empowers her to subvert and re-define her subordinate position as a woman. Although May is subject to the forces of the dominant ideology of the patriarchy completely, she creates oppositional meanings and pleasure by using resources of the dominant power. Indeed, she employs the tactics and guileful ruses of the weak to follow her illicit sexual adventure and gain partial freedom of her body and space. By examining May's resistance to dominant structures in the context of John Fiske's popular culture theory, this article analyses May as a figure of resistance who evades her subjection and transforms it to her advantage by making use of, what Fiske calls, the tactics, artful stratagems, and tricks of the weak.
Keywords: Fabliau, Chaucer, the *Merchant's Tale*, woman, John Fiske, popular culture, popular resistance.

Öz

Orta Çağ İngiliz edebiyatının popüler bir türü olan fabliyö, yaşlı bir adamla evli olan genç bir kadının kocasını aldatışını anlatan kısa, müstehcen ve komik hikayedir. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Hikayeleri*'ne, January'nin genç karısı May'in evlilik dışı ilişkisini konu edinen *Tüccar'ın Hikayesi*'ni fabliyö olarak dahil eder. May'in şehvet düşkünü ve kocasını aldatan bir kadın olarak tasviri fabliyönun tür olarak antifeminist olduğu iddialarını güçlendirse de aynı zamanda, May'in fabliyödaki olaylara aktif katılımı ona bir kadın olarak ikincil konumunu alt üst etme ve kendini yeniden tanımlama gücü de verir. May, John Fiske'in popüler kültür kuramında belirtilen egemen ideolojinin gücünü kendi lehine kullanan ve ideolojinin gücüne maruz kalmasına rağmen, bu gücün kaynaklarını kullanarak muhalif anlamlar ve zevkler üretebilen bir kadındır. Aslında, May güçsüzlerin taktiklerini ve hilekar oyunlarını yasak ilişkisini sürdürebilmek, bedeni ve kullandığı mekanlar üzerinde kısmi yetkinlik elde etmek için kullanır. John Fiske'in popüler kültür kuramı bağlamında, bu makale May'in egemen yapılara karşı direnişini irdeleyerek, onun ikincil konumunu savuşturan, bunu güçsüzün hile, taktik ve kurnazlıklarından faydalanarak kendi lehine dönüştüren bir direniş figürü olarak analiz eder.
Anahtar sözcükler: Fabliyö, Chaucer, *Tüccar'ın Hikayesi*, kadın, John Fiske, popüler kültür, popüler direniş.

[*] This article is based on my Master's Thesis titled ""Blameth Nat Me": Popular Resistance and Chaucer's Women in His Fabliaux."

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Introduction

This article argues that May in the *Merchant's Tale* is a figure of resistance, who avoids her subjection as a woman and manipulates it to her own advantage by using the tactics and strategies of the subordinate. Her subjugation to the patriarchal discourse of gender and her resistance to it are analysed within the framework of John Fiske's popular culture theory. In order to examine May's inferior status and her aversion of it, May's secondary position in her marriage is explained within the dynamics of medieval societal values, law, and the Church; and it is made clear that she is actually the victim rather than the victimizer of her husband January in the marriage.

Medieval women constituted the most deprived group in medieval society which is categorised in three estates, namely, "Worshippers (*oratores*), Warriors (*bellatores*), and Workers (*laboratores*)" (Rigby, 2007, p. 26). This tripartite structure of medieval hierarchical society designated specific functions and roles for every estate to achieve a harmonious and single society, yet such a categorisation of medieval society left women out, and women were denied a place of their own in these three estates. Indeed, they belonged to the estate of their fathers, husbands or brothers. In this aspect, Shulamith Shahar states that,

> from the twelfth century onwards, women were almost always categori[s]ed separately. They are described as a distinct class, subdivided according to their social-economic, rather than 'socio-professional' positions. Otherwise, they are subdivided according to their personal, i.e. marital status, a division never applied to men. (1983, p. 2)

As Shahar points out, women in the Middle Ages were treated as a different class. Hence, medieval women could be analysed as a minority group who are exposed to unequal treatment and victimized by shared discrimination. Medieval women were objects of shared discrimination; that is, they were classified as a marginal group and were defined in relation to major medieval institutions.

Classified as a distinct estate, "the fourth estate," medieval women were considered to have specific sins and faults attributed to them (Shahar, 1983, p. 3). Vanity, pride, greed, promiscuity, gluttony, drunkenness, bad temper, and fickleness were some of these sins and faults ascribed to them because of which women were barred from public offices or any job requiring authority (Shahar, 1983, p. 3). Consequently, women were mostly given the responsibility of domestic occupations such as serving well to the husband, bringing up children, and taking care of household chores. The concept of an ideal woman in the Middle Ages entailed that women should dedicate themselves to their husbands and children, and they should necessarily acknowledge their inferior position. Also, they should not deal with anything requiring authority. As Jacqueline Murray asserts, in the Middle Ages,

> women were considered inferior and their virtue was interpreted according to the degree to which they accepted their theoretical and social inferiority. Submission and obedience were virtues. Pride, ambition, and autonomy were perceived ultimately as rebellious, and as crimes against both the natural and the moral order. The best thing inferior woman could do was to know her place. (1995, p. 2)

Not having an opportunity to claim a space for themselves, medieval women were both encouraged and obliged to remain in the space, which was mainly defined by two powerful medieval institutions, namely the Church and aristocracy. Indeed, the concept of woman, which was an ideological formation developed by these influential medieval institutions, displays how medieval women's sphere was rigidly defined, and remaining in their allotted space was an indispensable virtue for them. As Barbara A. Hanawalt explains, in the Middle Ages "a woman's reputation might hinge on her ability to remain in a particular, acceptable space" (1998, p.19). Thus, if women exceeded the borders of their appropriate space, they would be perceived as rebellious and sinful, and punished accordingly.

Moreover, medieval English literature recognises women's powerlessness and secondariness as essential virtues to be acquired and labels women who lack these virtues as immoral and rebellious. In fact,

medieval English literature has a controversial attitude towards women (Whitaker, 1995, p. xiii). On the one hand, women are idealised if they are submissive, passive, and obedient; on the other hand, they are condemned if considered as seductive, active, and disobedient. The reasons for this conflicting literary representation of women are quite varied and multifaceted (Whitaker, 1995, p. xiii). One of the reasons is the long-standing antifeminist tradition that marginalises women as a subordinate group. Antifeminism or misogyny is defined as "[h]atred or dislike of, or prejudice against women" ("misogyny"). Antifeminism and the Middle Ages seem so coterminous that the word "medieval" seems redundant in the term "medieval misogyny" due to "the assumptions governing our perception of the Middle Ages [a]s the viral presence of antifeminism" (Bloch, 1987, p. 1). Conspicuously, medieval misogyny is a deep-rooted tradition which began to develop even before the Middle Ages. Having a multi-layered background, misogyny is too miscellaneous and too vast to be reduced to general statements. As Howard Bloch argues, medieval misogyny can be traced back to the Old Testament and to Ancient Greek culture, and also, it dates back to Judaic law (1987, p. 1). Its traces can be observed in "ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part and parcel of biological, gynaecological, and medical knowledge; and philosophy" (Bloch, 1987, p. 1). It seems to prevail almost all aspects of social and political life of the Middle Ages.

Medieval misogyny borrows much from ancient philosophies which are revisited and reinterpreted in the light of Christian theology and its doctrines. Saint Thomas Aquinas, for instance, interprets Aristotelian binaries regarding men and women, namely, male/female, active/passive, and form/matter and defines the male sex as "active" and female sex as "passive" (qtd in Horowitz, 1975, p. 186). Adopting a hierarchical view, church fathers define the female sex as inferior and reinforce this relegation by linking the creation of woman to a linguistic act (Bloch, 1987, p. 9). Since Adam, "the namer of things" (Bloch, 1987, p. 9), is the first to speak and to name the woman as Eve, woman also becomes the creation of Adam. Thus, "woman is by definition a derivation of man, who as the direct creation of God remains both chronologically antecedent and ontologically prior" (Bloch, 1987, p. 10). Interpretations of the Creation by the church fathers subordinate women to men since the man is created in God's own image, and the woman is taken "out of Man" (Holy Bible, p. 2.23). Thus, woman is marginalised as secondary, derivative, supervenient, supplemental, inferior, debased, scandalous, and perverse (Bloch, 1987, p. 10).

Not only woman's secondary position in the Creation, but also her active part in the Original Sin is used to emphasise woman's weakness. For example, St Augustine, another important figure to contribute to medieval misogyny, focuses on the sin that the woman committed. In relation to the Original Sin, he comments on St. Paul's ideas,

> we must give consideration to the statement, 'And you shall be subject to your husband, and he shall rule over you,' to see how it can be understood in the proper sense. For we must believe that even before her sin woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him . . . St. Paul says, ' Through love serve one another.' But by no means would he say, 'Have dominion over one another, but St Paul does not permit a woman to rule over a man. The sentence pronounced by God gave this power rather to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master. (1982, pp. 170-171)

St. Augustine confirms woman's inferiority to man due to her active part in the Original Sin. Therefore, he concludes that man should have ultimate authority over woman whose nature is rather weak and is inclined to err. In this respect, Whitaker summarises the position of woman: "Woman in medieval Christendom bore a double burden: the inferiority of having been created from Adam's rib and the guilt of having, through disobedience, lost Paradise and condemned the race to pain, sin and death" (1995, p. xi). This negative view of woman is gradually modified thanks to the Cult of Virgin Mary in which woman is modelled as esteemed,

dignified, and venerable. Virgin Mary is idealised as an obedient and pious woman (Reis[2], 2005, p. 21). Yet, even though the Cult adds positive characteristics to the medieval concept of woman, it still accentuates woman's passivity and foregrounds her submissive nature. Although woman's passivity is often considered a source of esteem and honour, it is also used as a medium of oppression.

Unlike the concept of woman in the Cult of Virgin Mary, woman in the model of Eve is unreliable, weak, and deceitful. Eve is usually described with pejorative adjectives because she is the one to be tempted by the Satan, to eat the forbidden fruit, and to tempt Adam to eat it, causing man's fall owing to her rebellious act and active role in the Original Sin. Also, along with Mary and Eve dualism, women and men were stereotypically categorised in binary oppositions because in this context, it is affirmed that the model of woman in the Middle Ages is based on the principle that woman and man are considered as opposites, and men are regarded as the superior since woman is attributed negative and undesirable characteristics (Reis, 2005, p. 21).

Medieval misogyny as a combination of Christian doctrines and classical philosophy plays a crucial role in forming literary images of women. Fabliau[3], one of these literary genres, includes representations of women as promiscuous, lascivious, scheming, adulterous, lecherous, and fickle. At this stage, it is important to examine fabliau which is considered a misogynist literary genre in depth. Fabliau emerged as a French genre in the twelfth century and maintained its favour through the thirteenth century. Most of the extant fabliaux were composed between 1200 and 1340. There are more than one hundred and fifty Old French fabliaux in manuscripts, which validates the genre's popularity during the Middle Ages. Their exact date and authors cannot be specified; however, the earliest author is believed to be Jean Bodel, known as the poet of Arras. Despite its popularity, little is known about the origins of the fabliau. On the one hand, Old French fabliau's roots can be found in Classical Antiquity although the poets of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century did not know much about Greek and Latin texts (Bloch, 1986, p. 1). On the other hand, Bédier claims that some fabliaux are derived from oriental sources while some display similarities with comic literature of Greece and Rome (1964, p. 118). Evidently, Old French fabliau's origins cannot be found; however, it is mostly accepted that it was a well-established genre at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

For a long period of time, fabliau attracted very little critical attention. In 1893, Joseph Bédier, the first major critic to analyse fabliau in depth, offers a brief definition of fabliau in his seminal work, *Les Fabliaux*: "contes a rire en vers" – "a short, funny story written in verse" (1964, p. 30). In his short definition, Bédier mainly touches upon three basic characteristics of fabliau. According to Bédier, fabliau is a brief and humorous narrative story which is written in verse. Bédier's definition is not conclusive, yet it occasions novel analyses of the genre with various perspectives.

Furthermore, fabliau is usually treated as a light genre lacking any artistic merit. The reason for its "reputation of being without poetry" (Bloch, 1986, p. 7) is often its sexual content. As the fabliau plot is based on the love triangle of a young wife, an old gullible husband, and a lover, sexuality and obscenity as themes are inevitably included in fabliau. The comic nature of fabliau stems from its bawdy actions and sexual language. Gale Sigal states that, "the humor of fabliau is primarily sexual, involving various problems of sexual opportunity, privacy, potency, compatibility, rivalry or obstacles to sexual satisfaction" (1996, p. 206). In this regard, fabliau can be regarded as the first literary genre which uses sexual language and deals with sexuality in carnal terms. Hence, as White argues,

> in the thirteenth century, a new genre appeared that dealt with sexual encounter in more materialistic terms. The new form, the fabliau, added the literary language a vocabulary of vulgarisms from the spoken vernacular. At the same time, it gave European literature a new theme: sexuality that betokens no personal fulfilment, but rivalrous interpersonal struggle. (1982, p. 185)

[2] Huriye Reis's *Adem'in Bilmediği, Havva'nın Gör Dediği: Ortaçağda Türk ve İngiliz Kadın Yazarlar* is only available in Turkish. All translations from this book are my own.

[3] Fabliau is borrowed from French and since no English word replaces it, the word fabliau loses its italics.

Female sexuality in medieval literary works is never represented as materialistic as in fabliau, yet this new theme of sexuality conveyed through sexual language causes the genre to be labelled as light. Sexual conflict and relations draw on stock characters such as "a cunning and sexually assertive wife, a greedy and lecherous priest, and a jealous, gullible husband who is usually the butt of the joke at the denouement" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 2). Sexualities of these characters are generally used to create comic effect. Fabliaux as short medieval comedies are often thought "to end on a happy note and support social hierarchy"; nevertheless, fabliaux are often subversive, and "they upend religious authority, class distinctions, and patriarchal marriage without restoring order at the end" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 1).

Despite its notorious reputation, fabliau was quite popular in England; however, only a few English fabliaux survived. English fabliaux are generally categorised in two groups, and the first one covers fabliaux of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century while the second group includes only Geoffrey Chaucer's fabliaux in the *Canterbury Tales*. Although there is no trace of fabliau in Old English literature, Middle English literature has a few fabliaux, namely, *Dame Sirith*, which is the first extant English fabliau, *The Pennyworth of Wit,* and *The Vox and the Wolf.*

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* includes six fabliaux: the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale,* the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Shipman's Tale,* the *Summoner's Tale,* and the *Friar's Tale.* Fabliau as the most frequently represented genre in the *Canterbury Tales* displays two major differences from its Old French counterparts. First, Chaucer's precedents do not employ any framework for the fabliaux, but Chaucer uses Canterbury pilgrimage as a narrative framework. Moreover, Chaucer's fabliaux are narrated by realistic characters in an atmosphere of verisimilitude. Chaucer's contribution to the genre is not limited with these two characteristics. Other than realism as a Chaucerian invention in the genre, the addition of an introduction to each tale is another significant contribution. However, the most striking difference from its precedents and contribution to the genre, as Eve Salisbury notes, is Chaucer's omission of obvious pornographic characteristics of French tradition (2002). Chaucer omits notorious descriptions of the body parts and profligate situations, which cover an abundant part in the French corpus. As Salisbury further comments, "the English corpus . . . appears to be bowdlerized," and "the pornographic impulses of the French genre made to conform to more decorous behaviours" (2002). To summarise, Chaucer improves the genre with his additions of "detailed settings, complex characters, intricate plots, and the inclusion of tropes from "higher" literary genres" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 3).

In Chaucerian corpus, fabliau, defined as a short, humorous, and bawdy tale, usually follows a similar plot involving an adulterous young wife who cheats on her gullible and old husband. The action in the fabliaux, thus, revolves around a love triangle in which the young wife pursues her sexual adventures and betrays her husband with a young and virile man. It further develops around the wife's struggle to hide her sexual exploits until she achieves to manipulate the situation to her own advantage. Because of this obligatory love triangle the genre includes, the fabliau is mostly classified as a scandalous genre. Bloch argues that fabliaux are scandalous because of "the excessiveness of their sexual and scatological obscenity, their anticlericalism, antifeminism, anticourtliness, the consistency with which they indulge the senses" (1986, p. 11). As Bloch clarifies, the genre is thematically associated with bawdiness, vulgarity, and avarice, and the plot is often pertinent to basic instincts such as sexual lust and greediness (1986, p. 11).

As stated, one of the characteristic themes of fabliau is undoubtedly adultery of the young married woman, because of which "fabliau presents women as the daughters of Eve, as generally morally reprehensible and dangerous to man; insatiable and extravagant sexual sirens with their bodies, and perjurers, temptresses or endless naggers with their tongues" (Hines, 1993, p. 31). These representations of women as deceivers and naggers strengthen the claims of fabliau as an antifeminist genre (Perfetti, 2006, 17-31).

At first glance, fabliau women are categorised as active dupers and condemned as victimizers. An in-depth analysis of them, however, demonstrates that they are also victims who are subordinated to the dynamics of medieval society which allocated women to a very restricted space. Similarly, Chaucer's women in his fabliaux, who are all married except Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale*, are hailed into subordinate positions by medieval institution of marriage. In medieval society, most women were married although there were women who renounced marriage to be able to remain chaste and unattainable. Chastity has been

considered as "a more Christian way of life" since the beginning of Christianity (Shahar, 1983, p. 65). For instance, St. Paul permits marriage only as a concession to adultery and immoral behaviour. He states, "but if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn" (*The Holy Bible,* p. 7:9). Therefore, marriage is considered a consolation after the Fall. Later, Church transforms marriage into a sacrament (Shahar, 1983, p. 66). That is, Church gradually creates a positive theory of marriage and organises the relations of the partners. It also forms a hierarchical relationship between wife and husband and establishes husband as the lord and the master of his wife.

The Church permits sexuality for procreation and regulates sexual affairs of the married couple within the framework of Christianity. As Shahar notes, "theologians not only justified sexual relations for the purpose of procreation; they sometimes justified such relations on a different ground, that of the mutual obligations (*depitum*) of the partners in marriage" (1983, p. 70). Here, the mutual obligations refer to conjugal debt. These mutual obligations in marriage recognise women's sexuality, yet they also imply that women are sexually insatiable. In the writings of churchmen, woman is represented as "the eternal seductress of saints and ascetics [who] do not tempt man only in order to dominate him or to bring about his downfall, but in order to satisfy her own appetites" (Shahar, 1983, p. 71).

In addition to the ecclesiastical views of marriage, matrimonial laws also play a vital role in designating the relations between the respective roles of man and woman in medieval society. Medieval laws fail to recognise woman in marriage as equal to man despite providing certain rights to the married woman. Before medieval law, woman does not have a voice of her own because her choice does not matter in marriage. For a proper marriage ceremony, three stages are required: negotiations between families, betrothal and marriage ceremony at the church door (*in facie ecclesiae*) (Shahar, 1983, p. 81). Since negotiation between families is the first indispensable stage of a proper marriage ceremony, girls are often forced by their families into marriage. According to the law, the consent to marriage is not given by the bride but by her protector who is her father, brother or a male relative (Shahar, 1983, p. 82). Therefore, marriage is regarded as a business transaction in which both sides' choices are neglected.

On the other hand, the duties of both partners are rigidly defined in marriage. The vital duty of a wife is obedience to her husband, which the law guarantees. According to Beaumanoir, a French jurist, husband is free to employ any medium to reform his wife (qtd in Shahar, 1983, p. 84). The husband, as Beaumanoir claims, has the right to punish her but he could not kill her (qtd in Shahar, 1983, p. 84). In cases of violation of the law, both wife and husband are punished equally; however, wife's adultery has been cited more and considered as more sinful (Shahar, 1983, p. 106). Despite identical punishments before law, while a married woman who has an extramarital affair with a man whether married or single, is treated as an adulteress, a married man is considered an adulterer "only if he had relations with a married woman (a relationship with a spinster or widow was defined only as fornication)" (Shahar, 1983, p. 107).

An equally important reason for woman's subordination to her husband in medieval marriage is economic. In medieval marriage as "an economic unit" (Karras, 2001, p. 85), the wife cannot not lead a life without her husband's financial sources since woman is mostly excluded from working life. Wife's situation is not suitable to support herself financially because wife is usually excluded from the market place and/or any economic activity (Butler, 2006, p. 340).

Marriages in fabliaux are also presumed to be between financially and socially unequal partners. It is often the case that a poor young woman is married to a rich old man. In fact, it is highly probable that young woman of fabliau is married without her consent. Moreover, reader or audience is never addressed about the choice and the desires of the woman, but the desires of husband are overtly stated. The incompatibility of the ages of the couple also suggests that the old man pursues sexual satisfaction through a young body. Although woman's extramarital sexual affairs are at the centre of the fabliau plot, woman's uncontrollable lust is actually only the backdrop of her husband's prurience.

Considering all these issues above, May in the *Merchant's Tale* as a married woman is subordinate to her husband. She cannot lead a life without her husbands' resources because she is not able to earn her own money. However, she both uses January's resources for her own advantage and also against the system which subjugates her. Since woman's voice is silenced in almost all aspects of marriage in the fabliau, subordinate woman is coerced to find creative ways. As Joan Ferrante states in a different context, women

"with limited opportunities, . . . find subtle or hidden ways to exercise such power, to manipulate people and situations, and to spin out fictions which suit them better than reality, fictions by which they can, or hope to, control reality" (1988, p. 213). Similarly, May does not yield to subjection, which the dominant medieval patriarchal discourse of gender demands. Instead, with limited opportunities, she creates her own meanings and gets pleasure from her resistance to her husband by redefining her subject position as a young woman married to an old husband.

Hence, in a general sense, as Anne Ladd puts it, deceitful wives in fabliaux are also "winning women" (1975, p. 100) because they turn a threatening situation to their own interest. Thus, like women in fabliaux, May manages to "come out on top" (Johnson, 1983, p. 299) owing to their quick-wit and ingenuity. Lesley Johnson states,

> [i]n many fabliaux where the lover escapes any repercussions of his adultery, the credit is most often due to the quick-thinking wit of the wife who prevents her husband from discovering her lover. We are not encouraged to laugh at the wives in these narratives, nor to condemn them; rather we are invited to laugh with them and to view their success with considerable esteem. (1983, p. 299)

Hence, May becomes one of these "winning women" in reconstructing her relation to the system disempowering her. Adultery and trickery the *Merchant's Tale* includes encourage audience not to denounce the immoral nature of May but to laugh together (Johnson, 1983, p. 299). Hence, deception and trickery in the fabliau become a means of entertainment rather than a tool to condemn women.

Moreover, trickery can be considered an indispensable virtue of fabliau as it occasions laughter, one of the main aims of medieval comic literature. Thus, sexual adventures women pursue in fabliau and trickery they fall back upon do not label them as immoral or fickle. Their function is rather for achieving a comic climax. Also, sexual roles, in Johnson's words, "are used in the fabliaux not necessarily to confirm or promote sexual stereotypes but as valuable means for overturning conventional relationships or subverting appearances in the interests of comic action" (1983, p. 303). It should also be noted that fabliau as a subversive genre adopts poetic justice in a transgressive way. In Kaufman's perception, "fabliau justice . . . does not conform to the religious morality, but it does have predictable priorities. It rewards youth, wit, generosity, freedom of spirit, and those who do not take themselves too seriously" (2017, p. 5). Thus, May's extramarital sexual affair does not necessarily deprecate her as an adulterous young wife, but in a way provides her with a temporary empowerment. In this respect, May in the *Merchant's Tale* as "the subordinate" (Fiske, 1991a, p. 4), as a member of "the fourth estate" (Shahar, 1983, p. 3) and minority group forms herself a culture which is located within and against the power structures which disempower her.

John Fiske's Theory of Popular Resistance and May in the *Merchant's Tale*

Women in fabliaux establish themselves a popular culture – "the culture of the subordinated and disempowered" (Fiske, 1991a, p. 4). As John Fiske suggests, popular culture always contains the traces of power relations and the signs of both domination and subordination (1991a, p. 4). Popular culture is contradictory in nature because it expresses not only the voice of domination but also of the subordination (Fiske, 1991a, p. 5). Popular culture is an active process of generating people's own meanings out of the resources of power structures, which also disempower them (Fiske, 1991b, p. 1). Hence, there is the eternal struggle between the powerful and the subordinate.

According to Fiske, people play an active role in making their own culture by evading and resisting the forces of domination (1991a, p. 20). Due to the excorporation process[4], the subordinate "make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system that subordinates them"

[4] Excorporation process is "the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system" (Fiske, 1991a, p.15).

(1991a, p. 15). Paradoxically, subordinated people both collaborate with power structures and resist them. In Fiske's words, they

> align themselves with the forces of domination, for by ignoring the complexity and creativity by which the subordinate cope with the commodity system and its ideology in their everyday lives, the dominant underestimate and thus devalue the conflict and struggle entailed in constructing popular culture. (1991a, pp. 18-19)

The constant conflict between the powerful and the disempowered is, thus, a continual struggle that the forces of domination underestimate.

Fiske also touches upon the power of everyday life in which the subordinate generate their meanings from this struggle. Following Michel de Certeau who adopts a military metaphor to define this struggle as a "guerrilla attack" which never fights against the powerful system openly, but always poses an opposition to it, Fiske states that everyday life of people is the space where conflictual benefits of the powerful are discussed, negotiated, and challenged (1991a, p. 32). In order to explain the part of everyday life in popular culture, Fiske makes use of de Certeau's theory of everyday life and adopts his terms, which are the metaphors of conflict – "strategy, tactic, guerrilla warfare, poaching, guileful ruses and tricks." For Fiske, De Certeau's theory proposes that, "the powerful are cumbersome, unimaginative, and overorganized, whereas the weak are creative, nimble, and flexible. So the weak use guerrilla tactics against the strategies of the powerful, make poaching raids upon their texts or structures, and play constant tricks" (1991a, p. 32). The creativity of the weak makes up intricate and subtle ways within power structures to resist their domination. The forces of the weak attack the forces of power by "poaching raids" and "guileful ruses." Since the powerful attempt to exercise their power on every space, the weak are obliged to make use of what they have in their everyday life. The core of culture of everyday life lies in "adaptation" and "ways of using imposed systems" or "the trickery" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 18):

> Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game . . . characterise the subtle, the stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants's strategems, there is a certain art in placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space . . . Even in the field of manipulation and enjoyment. (de Certeau, 1988, p. 18)

Popular resistance, therefore, consists of "adaptation" and is achieved through the resources of the power. People have to 'make do' and create their own meanings with their creative manoeuvres out of the resources the power provides. These manoeuvres are "the tactics of everyday life and of the weak," through which subordinate people construct their meanings and derive pleasure out of them. These tactics, as Fiske argues, are "the ancient art of 'making do,' of constructing our space within and against *their* space, of speaking *our* meanings with *their* language" (1991a, p. 36).

Hence, thanks to the "poaching attacks, guileful ruses and tricks," people create their own oppositional meanings, and accordingly they take pleasure out of them. Fiske states that, popular pleasure originates from social allegiances constructed by the weak (1991a, p. 49). Fiske categorises popular pleasure into two types: "those of evasion, which center around the body and which socially tend to cause offense and scandal, and those of producing meanings, which center around social identity and social relations, and work socially through semiotic resistance to hegemonic force" (1991a, p. 54).

Accordingly, the body is a site upon which meanings can be attributed by the dominant or the disempowered. The effort for control over the meanings and pleasures of the body is important in the sense that, "[p]opular pleasures work through and are experienced or expressed through the body, so control over the meanings and behaviours of the body becomes a prime disciplinary apparatus" (Fiske, 1991a, p. 81). Thus, excessive pleasures of the body such as drunkenness, sexuality, idleness, rowdiness are usually regarded as menacing threats to the space of the dominant (Fiske, 1991a, p. 75). The body as a site, where

the dominant can exercise their power, is attempted to be controlled, and its excessive pleasures are condemned because these popular pleasures provide subordinate people with power of overcoming their subjection and avoiding the domineering agencies.

In the same line, May's marriage in the *Merchant's Tale* subordinates her to January. Her powerlessness is accentuated from the beginning of the tale to the end. The *Merchant's Tale* begins with January's depiction as an old man who is determined to have a wife and further goes on with Justinus and Placebo's debate on marriage. Justinus and Placebo counsel January about marriage and what kind of wife he should take (IV 1476-1498, IV 1519-1531)[5]. In their debate, the position of woman and her responsibilities as a wife are clearly defined. Placebo, the flatterer, states that the knight is right to take a wife while Justinus, the just one, disagrees and claims otherwise. In both cases of advice and the statements of the narrator, what May thinks or feels is not important (IV 1693-1695), and she is merely considered an object of January's desire. January's intention to marry a young woman is quite evident in that he desires an heir, and he is also worried about his past life which is full of debauchery; and if he gets married, he will be able to "allay his lust in a manner sanctioned by the church" (Ruud, 2006, p. 443). So, by marriage, January wants the sanction of the Church and aims to atone for his past lecherous life. The statement "take a wyf" also discloses May's passive position:

> To take a wyf it is glorious thing,
> And namely whan a man is oold and hoor;
> Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor.
> Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir,
> On which he myghte engendren hym an heir,
> And lede his lyf in joye and in solas (IV 1269-1273)

Wedlock requires the wife's passivity, and she is allowed to be active only in fulfilling her husband's wishes. Therefore, the ideal wife should be January's "paradys terrestre" (IV 1332) because the wife is "mannes helpe and his confort" (IV 1331). Also, May is reduced to a procreation machine for January. Indeed, marriage in this tale is considered a market place where men purchase brides for themselves (Laskaya, 1995, p. 82). January who decides to marry a young wife because he can have children with her and, thus, with whom he can have an heir, through which his "heritage sholde [not] falle/In straunge hande" (IV 1439-1440). Justinus, who also perceives the notion of marriage as a transaction which regulates the property transferences and rights, confirms such a reduction of woman into a commodity (IV 1439-1440).

An equally significant aspect of May's subordination in her marriage is presented in the age difference between January and May. January wants to take a young wife not only because he wants an heir but also he thinks he can control and guide her. Also, January's choice of a young wife suggests that he can satisfy his lust on her young body. Furthermore, according to the theory of old age in the Middle Ages, old age indicates "a necessary downsizing and considerable loss of abilities and characteristics to youth" including the sexual abilities (Reis, 2013, p. 33). January is old because "He passed sixty yeer" (IV 1252). However, January's old age does not seem to decrease his sensual desire. January's intentional ignorance of this fact is not idiosyncratic to him, on the contrary, it is very common. Besides, it is treated as funny because people in the Middle Ages believed that a young girl would inevitably betray her old husband for a more sexually active partner. Chaucer uses this motif to achieve comic climax in the *Merchant's Tale,* and uses allegorical names to emphasise the age difference in the marriage of January and May.

Lacking any power to refuse to marry January, May becomes an object of male consumption. In the first night of their marriage, January consumes May sexually by which he is able to show he is the powerful part in their marriage:

[5] Qutotations from the *Merchant's Tale* are given in line numbers from *The Riverside Chaucer* edited by Larry Benson.

This Januarie is ravysshed in a traunce
At every tyme he looked on hir face;
But in his herte he gan hire to manace
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne
Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne. (IV 1750-1754)

This night is so important for January to prove himself as a virile man that he prepares recipes of aphrodisiacs in order to be sexually active and powerful by reading Constantinus Africanus, the author of *De Coitu*:

He drynketh yposcras, clarree, and vernage
Of spices hoote t'ecreessen his corage;
And many a letuarie hath he ful fyn,
Swiche as the cursed monk, daun Constantyn,
Hat written in his book *De Coitu*;
To eten hem alle he has no thing eschu. (IV 1807-1812)

While January's preparations are presented in detail, only information given about May is mentioned in passive voice: "The bryde was broght abedde as astille as stoon" (IV 1818). As inferred, she is frozen with fear and lacks any power to resist. She remains silent and motionless:

And Januarie hat faste in armes take
His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.
He lullteh hire; he kisseth hire ful ofte;
With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,
Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere
For he was shave al newe in his manere-
He rubbeth hire aboute hir tender face. (IV 1821-1827)

January is depicted as full of voluptuousness and without care and affection. His masculine power is strengthened with the description of his beard as "thikke brustles of . . . berd unsofte" (IV 1824). It is through sex that January confirms his power on May, and he wants May to think of lovemaking as an offence. His kisses which are expected to be the expressions of love turn out to be examples of male violence. Using the verb 'rubbeth' for caressing implicates that January intends to hurt May and to show his power over her. He is only interested in satisfying his lust and exercising his power on her. Along with January's self-satisfying and violent attitude towards May, he is presented as a repulsive old man:

The slake skyn aboute his nekke shaketh
Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene. (IV 1849-1854)

May's silence in their lovemaking shows how repellent the action is in her perspective: "God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte" (IV 1851). This is the only statement about May's possible thoughts about the situation she is coerced to be in. Otherwise, the statement may show that January's lovemaking is not satisfactory for her. However, she has to comply with all these subjugating responsibilities as a woman and as a wife.

As stated above, John Fiske defines popular culture as "a site of struggle" referring to the struggle between the forces of the power and the weak (1991a, p. 20). This fight displays itself in spatial practices

as well. As Fiske elucidates, "the powerful construct "places" where they can exercise their power – cities, shopping malls, schools, workplaces and houses" (1991a, p. 32). Yet, the weak design their own "spaces" within the powerful's spaces, and the weak "make the places temporarily theirs as they move through them, occupying them for as long as they need or have to" (1991a, p. 32). That is, the weak occupy the powerful's spaces and consume them for their own intentions not for the powerful's intents. The weak transform the powerful's spaces into their own because practices of dwelling or consuming places are theirs, not the powerful's.

The use of the space of the powerful for the subordinate's subversive purposes can be observed in the way May uses January's house and garden. Accordingly, January as the dominant part designs his house and garden to serve his own intentions to subordinate May. House and garden are "private" spaces. Indeed, settings in fabliaux are often private spaces. As Woods affirms,

> fabliaux belong in or among the buildings of a town. Their significant space is inside or outside the walls of a house, a shop, a garden. It is a world of interiors, where entrances and exists, and ownership, are centrally important, a world, where material things are prominent, people's bodies count, small-town savvy can dominate space. (2008, p. 134)

In the private world that fabliau offers, settings are not varied, on the contrary, they are quite limited. Likewise, the *Merchant's Tale* presents only January's house and garden as settings, which restrict action and mobility. One of these spaces May inhabits is the house. Medieval concept of marriage, as a medium of controlling woman's activities in accordance with the dominant medieval gender ideology, strengthens May's confinement to the house and encourages her to remain there as her proper space. Hence, May as a wife is traditionally associated with the house: "A wyf is kepere of thyn housbondrye;/Wel maythe sike man biwaille and wepe,/Ther as ther nys no wyf the hous to kepe" (IV 1380-1382). Also, January does not consider his wife as an individual being with her own desires and needs, but identifies her with his house, and the house is January's space where he can effortlessly control her activities.

May is expected to yield to her spatial subjugation. Nevertheless, she overturns her spatial subjection by manipulation of her spatial practices, and she organises January's male spaces for her own benefit. January cannot entirely regulate spatial activities in the spaces constructed for himself, and thus, May avoids his intentions encoded in the spaces and invests her own meanings in them. In this course of actions, Fiske finds "a huge paradox" since "power can achieve its ends only by offering up its underbelly to the attacker; only by displaying its vulnerabilities to the guerrillas can the occupying army hold its terrain, however tenuously" (1991a, p. 41). Inspite of the fact that January oppresses May by various means, popular resistance methods such as tricks and tactics provide May with a strategic plan. May resists her husband by generating her own culture in which she is not a "helpless subject of an irresistible ideological system" (Fiske, 1991a, p. 45), but an active agent creating her own meanings and pleasures out of her resistance to her oppressor January. As Fiske asserts, "[a]ny space won by the weak is hard won and hard kept, but it *is* won and it *is* kept" (1991a, p. 45).

May is empowered by occupying January's spaces for her wishes despite only temporarily. Still, this temporary usurpation enables May to subvert the powerful's intentions on her space which are originally formed to subordinate her. To succeed in subverting the forces of power, May makes an alliance with Damyan. Damyan's wishful collaboration with her tricks and stratagems surely facilitates May's spatial resistance. Yet, still, her resistance (must) take(s) place in January's spaces, house and garden to which May is allowed because January designs them as his own private spaces where May can pay him marital debt: "He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;/So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon" (IV 2029-2030). January emphasises his ownership of the garden and only his intentions will be realised there. He also identifies his garden with May, and "he feels like the absolute proprietor of May" (Ellis, 1990, p. 618). Because he thinks he owns both the garden and May at the same time, he assumes there will be no threat there, and he will enjoy having privacy with May within his high-walled garden: "And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;/And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde" (IV 2050-2051). Nevertheless, May secretly gives the copy of the key to Damyan. Here, the key is an important symbol, suggesting the holder of authority – the

powerful one who has access to the garden as well as May's body. For this reason, only January possesses it.

One day, January invites May to his garden: "The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;/Com forth, my white spouse! Out of doute/Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!" (IV 2143-2145). When they arrive in the garden, Damyan is already there, who

> . . . [s]at in the bussh, and coughen she [May] bigan,
> And with hir finger signes made she
> That Damayn sholde clymbe upon a tree
> That charged was with fruyt, and up he wente" (IV 2208-2211).

Telling January that she craves for pears, May obviously implies she is carrying his child. As Seal points out, "May appears to be caught up in hunger and lust, whether the object of her desire is her husband's young squire Damyan or those sinful pears" (2014, p. 286). Using January's wish of an heir, May climbs to the tree by stepping on his back. May's implication of her possible pregnancy with January's child "adds a new complexity to the story" because it adds "the possibility of a false heir, further enhance[ing] her betrayals against her cuckolded husband" (Seal, 2014, pp. 285-286). Therefore, January's choice of a young wife as she can give him an heir and also can easily be controlled and guided is subverted by May who "guides" him in accordance with her desires and pleasures. Moreover, she also guides Damyan to be on the tree beforehand. Due to her guidance, Damyan is already on the tree where they are together despite January. Thereby, May violates January's private space by using his blindness and inserts her own meanings into it. Although January designs his garden for his pleasure and means to enclose May there, his private space turns out to be May's private space where she illicitly performs her desires with Damyan.

May's practicality and ability in her ploy with Damyan make their promiscuous plan run its course. May's spatial activities in privacy increase her mobility, and she gains more space for her tricks. Their plan works well due to May's alliance with Damyan and telling him to be in the garden in advance:

> For verraily he knew al hire entente,
> And every signe that she koude make,
> Wel bet than Januarie, hir owene make,
> For in a letter she hadde toold hym al
> Of this matere, how he werchen shal. (IV 2212-2216)

In fact, it can be stated that "May's use of the private space of the walled garden as her own space is a subversive use of the means of dominant power" (Reis, 2012, p. 132). Consequently, January's garden shifts to May's garden of pleasure where she derives pleasure out of her extramarital affair with Damyan. Thus, May's refashioning of January's garden as her own space positions her as a "poacher and a guerrilla fighter" who adopts the weak's stratagems. In Lefebvre's words, these ruses include:

> the adaptation of the body, time, space, desire: environment and the home . . . creation from recurrent gestures of a world of sensory experience; the coincidence of need with satisfaction, and, more rarely, with pleasure: work and works of art; the ability to create the terms of everyday life from its solids and its spaces. (1991, p. 35)

Therefore, May as a guerrilla fighter uses practical spatial ruses of everyday life such as adaptation, manipulation, and trickery. Since May's space is limited to January's house and garden, she has nothing to do but to "make do" with what she has (Fiske, 1991a, p. 34). Therefore, these tricks and strategies enable her to liberate herself from the limitations imposed on her. However, her freedom is violated by Pluto's interruption: Pluto restores January's sight during Damyan and May's copulation on the tree. January shouts with rage seeing them together. Thanks to Proserpina's help, May elides January's accusation with her quick

wit and use of language as a tool to deceive her husband. In the context of Old French fabliaux, Michelle Kohler comments on the place of deception and claims that "the subversive use of language is at the heart of much of the deception" in fabliaux (2004, p. 137). Similarly, May draws on her manipulative use of language to deceive her husband once again and fabricates an excuse, that is, January's sight is defective because the eyes are not accustomed to bright light after a long time of blindness and see false things. Therefore, May dupes January once again due to her good command of subversive language. She claims that January's newly restored eyesight misleads him. Subsequently, May's poaching attacks on January, thanks to her control of and activeness in the spaces that belong to January, enable her to gain herself more space where she can serve her own needs rather than serving her husband's desires. Eventually, January's spaces of oppression become May's own spaces of resistance and pleasure.

Conclusion

By demonstrating May's subjugation in her marriage in the *Merchant's Tale*, and her resistance to it by making use of January's spaces for her own interests and generating her own meanings and pleasures from them, this paper analyses May as a woman of resistance. By subversive use of private spaces, her body, and good command of language, May fulfils her desires and satisfies her needs in the very space of her husband, and thus she challenges and subverts the oppressive norms governing her spatial activities as a wife. She creates her own meanings and gets pleasure in stealing from the available male space which is originally designed for male use. Although May is denied the power to renounce the dominant discourse completely, she is able to construct "artful stratagems" against the system. She reshapes her position by acting within and against the dominant patriarchal discourse and becomes a figure of resistance.

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